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The Dangerous Spring

Ernest Hemingway's fascination with Spain resulted in some of the author's most famous works and made the colorful pageantry -- and bloody preoccupation -- of the village of Ronda famous

By *Leigh Ann Henion*
Sunday, March 29, 2009; Page W22

It's unsettling to have a severed, still-warm bull's ear hurtling toward you -- something I discovered firsthand -- but being the target of a projectile body part during a Spanish bullfight is considered an honor. I learned this cultural tidbit from reading Ernest Hemingway. My journey with the writer began many years ago with a poster, a \$3 thrift store find that, at first glance, didn't seem to have anything to do with Hemingway.

GALLERY



Ernest Hemingway's Spain

Ernest Hemingway made the colorful pageantry of the village of Rhonda famous.

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I was 15 years old when I bought a bullfight advertisement that depicted, in broad brush strokes, a matador and bull forever frozen in the honeyed afternoon light of Sept. 26, 1984. For years, I studied the poster in the confines of my teenage bedroom, enthralled for reasons I didn't fully understand. I was a vegetarian enamored with the ritualistic killing of bulls in a country I had never visited.

Hemingway was a bullfight enthusiast for much of his life. His time in Spain resulted in some of his greatest writing. "The Sun Also Rises" (1926) was inspired by a trip taken at the urging of Gertrude Stein, and "For Whom the Bell Tolls" (1940) is based on the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), which Hemingway covered as a correspondent for the North American Newspaper Alliance. References to bullfighting and matadors, also known as toreros, can be found in almost all of

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his Spain-based work.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning author wrote two books of nonfiction about bullfighting: "Death in the Afternoon" (1932) and a posthumously published work, "The Dangerous Summer" (1985). In "Death in the Afternoon" he revealed that he named the fictional matador in "The Sun Also Rises" Pedro Romero, after an 18th-century torero born in Ronda, Spain, but that he based the character on one of his contemporaries, another bullfighter from Ronda known as NiÃ±o de Palma. In "The Dangerous Summer" Hemingway recounts his experience traveling Spain's bullfighting circuit with Antonio OrdoÃ±ez, NiÃ±o's son, in 1959.

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During a recent Internet search, I discovered that Francisco Rivera Perez, a famous matador in his own right, was OrdoÃ±ez's son-in-law. I also learned that Perez was fatally gored in 1984 at the very event publicized on my poster. It was Perez's image that had been moving with me from house to house for the last 15 years. I was horrified, yet I found myself morbidly compelled to keep searching. My Internet quest led me in circles, always leaving me staring at black-and-white images of OrdoÃ±ez and Hemingway standing together in a

bullring.

Hemingway says in "Death in the Afternoon": "There is one town that would be better ... to see your first bullfight in if you were only going to see one and that is Ronda." Ronda -- one of Spain's pueblo blancos, or white villages -- is in Andalucia, the southernmost region of Spain separated from northern Africa by just nine miles of sea. The region is considered the cradle of modern bullfighting. Hemingway wrote of Ronda, "That is where you should go if you ever go to Spain on a honeymoon or if you ever bolt with anyone."

One night, in the blue light of my computer monitor, with my Perez poster keeping vigil over my desk, I decided it was time to visit Spain. I bolted with Hemingway.

Ronda, home to 35,000 inhabitants, is full of seemingly secret stairwells that lead into the center of town. As I walk its narrow alleys, I hear the jangle of keys in locks, metal against metal. Babies' cries echo off of plaster walls. I am given a peep show of daily life through cracked doors leading into marble-floored homes and through open windows crowded with flowerpots. As I approach the commercial area of town, I pass cafes where slabs of pork and cheese are displayed on open-air tables under chalkboards listing paella specials. Groups of old men in flat, woven hats sit around outdoor tables pouring shots of liquor for each other.

Paseo de E. Hemingway, one of Ronda's most spectacular pedestrian walkways, runs between Plaza de Toros, Ronda's bullfighting ring, and Plaza de Espana, the square overlooking El Tajo, the 300-foot-deep gorge that divides Ronda into two sections -- Old Town and New Town. The paseo empties directly into Plaza de Espana, which is an unassuming square full of hotels and souvenir shops selling woven handbags and child-size flamenco dresses. The two sections of Ronda are connected by three bridges, most notably the Puente Nuevo, a majestic stone bridge built in the late 1700s from stone pulled from the riverbed below. I lean against the wall barricading El Tajo, and I feel a tinge of vertigo. The scenic splendor is marred only by my familiarity with Hemingway's writing. Chapter 10 of "For Whom the Bell Tolls," in which hundreds of Fascists are executed in a gorge during the Spanish Civil War, is widely believed to have been based

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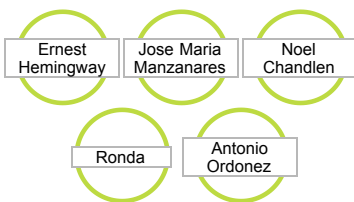
Hemingway's version of Plaza de Espana features a fountain with lions' heads spitting water, but this fountain doesn't exist in the square. He was writing fiction, after all. But his ayuntamiento, or town hall, is here, though it has been transformed from a government building into a luxurious state-run hotel. The rest of the square matches his description. Standing in Plaza de Espana, I can almost see the foreboding scene in Chapter 10: "He took the hat in his hand and sailed it off over the cliff with the motion a herdsman makes throwing a stone underhand at the bulls to herd them. The hat sailed far out into space and we could see it smaller and smaller, the patent leather shining in the clear air, sailing down to the river."

I am in Ronda for the annual Feria de Pedro Romero, a bullfighting-centric festival founded by Ordoñez and ceremoniously attended by Hemingway. During the festival, townspeople and matadors alike dress up in the 18th-century-style clothing made famous by the Spanish artist Francisco de Goya. The thoroughfare of Plaza de Espana is full of horse-drawn carriages carrying men in felt cordobes hats and women in mermaid-shaped flamenco dresses.

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